



A late afternoon walk to the Bronze Age stone circle at *Stones*

# A love letter to Dartmoor

Most days, **Jo Bradford** strides onto Dartmoor with her children and her iPhone, capturing its mercurial moods and sharing them with the world.

Words by *Alice Wright*. Photos by *Jo Bradford*.

From 1 January to 31 December 2015, Jo took a different picture of the moor every day, posting them on the social networking platform Instagram to create a photo-journal of the landscape's changing moods and seasons. Titled 'A Love Letter to Dartmoor', the project began as a very personal endeavour. But after catching the attention of Instagram itself, Jo was featured on its blog and her followers rocketed as people around the world became captivated by her images.

Watching clouds drift across the blue sky, and the play of light and shadow on the moorland below, Jo explains that it is light that fascinates her when she is out with her camera. She is not a landscape photographer by trade, or really a photographer at all in the traditional sense of the word. She describes her practice as "experimental cameraless photography", creating artwork that uses photographic mediums to capture light. After taking time out to have Grace, now three, Jo was itching to get back to work in her darkroom, and then along came Kade, now two.

"Having worked as a creative and not had children until my late 30s, I was very established in my routine of getting up and working for hours on my own in my darkroom and being creative," says Jo. "I was desperately craving an opportunity to get back to doing something similar."

Unable to return to her darkroom, Jo started heading out onto the moor instead, with her baby on her back, her toddler in an all-terrain buggy, and an iPhone in her pocket to take photos. As well as finding a creative outlet, she wanted to show Dartmoor in all its glory. Jo and her husband had moved from St Agnes in Cornwall to a remote, off-grid home near Okehampton Army Camp, and friends and family were bemused by their decision to swap a charmingly picturesque seaside village for what they perceived as the bleak, unwelcoming moor. "But for me, looking out of the window I'd see the most amazing light, fields of bluebells and the changing seasons," says Jo. "There's so much beauty here. That's what I wanted to share."

And so the idea for the 365-day challenge was born. Initially, Instagram followers were mainly friends and family, but over the next few months Jo built her

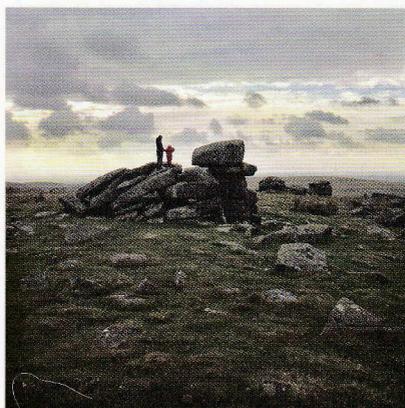
fan-base steadily. She always posted at 7pm, following advice from a friend to do it at the same time every day to establish a rhythm. "People said it was like a quiet moment of serenity in their crazy day." The captions were also important and Jo tried to evoke all the senses – describing the cold wind or the sound of a roaring river – to bring viewers into the moment with her.

And then, out of the blue, someone from Instagram phoned to say they would like to feature 'A Love Letter to Dartmoor' on the site's own blog. The post went live on 11 August. "I didn't realise what a big deal it was going to be," says Jo. "I was out at lunch and I looked at my phone and the screen was scrolling faster than I could read. I was picking up thousands of followers." Within ten minutes her phone had gone dead, the battery run down with all the notifications.

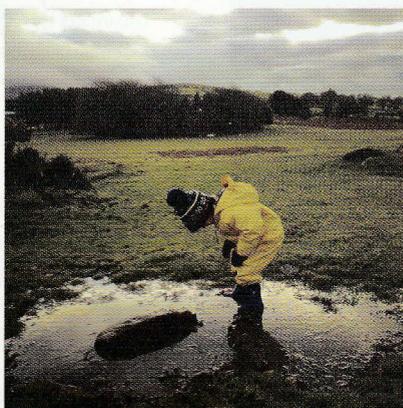
Jo's following leapt from around 2,000 to 10,000 following the blog post. Two weeks later, Instagram made her one of its 'suggested users' and her following surged again to 50,000. Apart from admiring her images, Instagram picked Jo out because she had a tightly curated project. "I didn't post anything that wasn't specific to that story," she says. "You're never going to get featured if you're posting pictures of your lunch or your family. It's in their interest to show their community isn't just full of people posting everyday things, it's full of creative people." They also liked the physical challenge – Jo's project took her out in snow, rain and wind, usually with two small children in tow.

Jo is delighted that not only has she demonstrated Dartmoor's beauty to thousands around the world, but she's also shown how much can be achieved with only a smartphone. "It's not about the kit, it's about being out there," she says. "I'm trying to inspire people to do something creative with their phone instead of just updating their Facebook status." She now runs workshops on mobile phone photography, so as we walk I'm keen to glean a few tips.

Jo advises going out early in the morning or an hour before sunset, when the contrast of light and shade will produce the most interesting photos – pointing to a rock



Rain clearing during an afternoon walk



Grace jumping in puddles



An old moss-covered stone wall



Jo Bradford



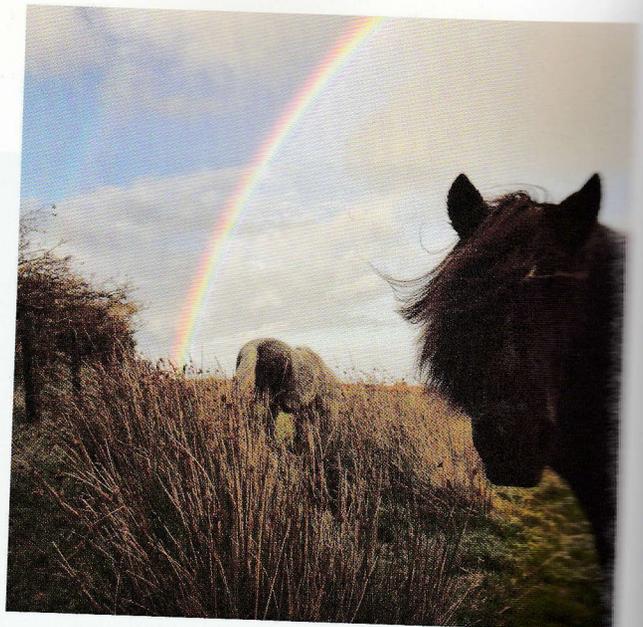
*Looking out of the window, I'd see the most amazing light, fields of bluebells and the changing seasons... That's what I want to share.*

formation, she notes how half is cast into shadow by the morning sun. Jo says she would often set out very early with a picnic breakfast for her children. As they ate and played around her, she sat and watched the changes in the light, waiting for her shot.

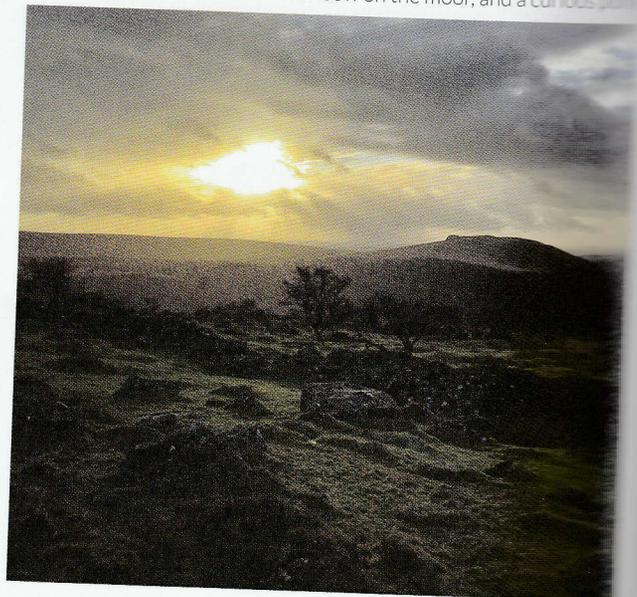
Back home she would choose the best photograph to post. This wasn't necessarily the most perfectly composed, but the one that best represented her experience of the day. "I see the photos as 365 emotional responses to the landscape," she says, and the project became a way of exploring and deepening her own relationship with the ancient moorland. "When I was setting off with the children strapped to me, and everything we needed for the day, I felt a connection with people who would have walked across the moor 3,000 years ago," she says. Often they trekked to one of Dartmoor's stone circles. As she took photos, Jo felt she was continuing a tradition by carrying out her own form of ritual there.

Jo is now back creating artwork in her darkroom, with recent exhibitions in Singapore, London and New York. But interest in her Instagram project has not abated. She was made an ambassador for Visit Dartmoor, and in 2016 all 365 photographs were exhibited at the Dartmoor National Park Visitor Centre. A book deal is also in the pipeline. And her thousands of loyal followers still want photos. So although she no longer posts every day, Jo is still out there on the moor with her children and her iPhone, capturing its ever-changing beauty and sharing it with the world. **M**

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Rainbow on the moor, and a curious pony



Sunset on the final day of the project

## TIPS FOR IPHONE LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

- A contrast of light and shade makes images more interesting so head out first thing, or just before sunset.
- Remember the rule of three - the principle that images look better when the subject isn't right in the middle. Dividing the image into three, vertically and horizontally, and then placing the subject somewhere along the lines, creates more visual interest. Place the subject along the lines or on the intersection. iPhones have an option to switch on a grid on the camera to help line up shots.
- Don't zoom as the digital enhancement affects the quality of the image. Use the default setting and crop later if necessary.
- A smartphone camera will usually focus automatically on the centre of an image. To change this tap on the screen to focus on the chosen subject then scroll up or down to change the exposure.
- Finding a path in the landscape can help lead the eye into the image.
- Use figures to give perspective.
- Take several photos, and take some slightly to the left and right of the chosen shot.